The 'N' Word:
A Complex Equity Adventure

A Note Before We Begin:

In past issues of the _Equity Express_, we present a scenario in which an inequity occurs in an educational setting, and offer non-example, more neutral, and more exemplar responses for how an educator may address the situation, along with resources to build educators' capacity for responding effectively.

For this issue, however, we take a different approach, given the history and contextual complexity of the topic: educators' responses to students' use of the "n word" (hereafter, referred to as "_the word_") in schools. We authored this issue to respond to recent requests for assistance we have received in our 13-state Region, primarily from white school administrators seeking guidance. Rather than presenting one scenario, we present three situations in which educators may hear the use of _the word_, without students' apparent intent to inflict harm. For each of these scenarios, we include two different educator responses, which reflect multiple perspectives including those across different members of MAP Center staff, and accounts for the big idea that _CONTEXT MATTERS_, particularly related to historical uses and connotations of _the word_.

This is a complex issue, about which people in the Black community may not necessarily agree. Differing perspectives are extremely important to learn and study so that white educators' responses are contextualized. For example, one perspective is that _the word_ is not to be used in any manner by a white person, however, there is a scenario below which explores the in-group (i.e., Black students potentially giving their white peers permission to say _the word_).

The three scenarios in this edition of _Equity Express_ are reflective of how many educators, many of whom are white women (Price, 2023), respond in the moment to _the word_: through either _speaking up_ or _staying silent_. The concluding scenario provides resources and guidance for non-Black educators to further develop their understanding(s) of those who have been historically oppressed, especially by symbolically violent language, and where they may begin to learn more about the perspectives of the Black community.

Scenario 1: Greeting Among Black Students

A group of Black students are talking before school in the hallway outside their classroom and are using *the word*. A white educator overhears this conversation.

Educator Response 1: "You all know the code of conduct. We don't use racially charged language in our school."

Intent

- The educator wants to protect students who may identify as Black, who may have traumatic experiences with multiple versions of *the word* (Price, 2023).
- The educator is enforcing their perspective of everyone's use of *the word* in society, without considering the complexity of its use.
- The educator wants to follow school protocols, rules, and procedures.

Impact

- The educator may help facilitate an inclusive academic space for some students, recognizing that the context of using *the word* matters and other students in the school may receive this exchange and think it is okay to use *the word* (Mitchell, 2023).
- The Black students may feel as though a white educator is policing their use of *the word*, thus creating more conflict (Price, 2023).
- This response doesn't clearly signal the historical meaning and power of *the word*, nor does the educator acknowledge how their identity may also influence the context of *the word* (Mitchell, 2023; Pryor, 2019).

Educator Response 2: *Inner sentiment: As a non-Black educator, I do not allow* the word *in my classroom, however, the hallway is typically a more common social area and I can clearly tell the students are using* the word *with an –a ending, and do not intend to harm,* create a hostile learning environment, *or disrupt the schooling practice. Since I am not an in-group member, I choose not to respond to the students' use of* the word.

Intent

- The educator believes that in no circumstance should a non-Black educator police Black students' use of *the word*, as they are not an in-group member, believing they should allow for autonomy of language for Black students (Asim, 2008).
- The educator considers the context behind the use of *the word*, but lacks awareness of how its use could still inflict a traumatic response in some students (Asim, 2008).
- The educator understands *the word* was used as a term of endearment as opposed to the alternative use of *the word* with an –er sound which is used by white people as a form racial violence, and with intent to cause harm (Asim, 2008).

Impact

- The educator attempts to respect the students by having an understanding of the disparate impact of certain discipline policies (e.g., Zero Tolerance Discipline Policies (Kyser & Warren, 2015).
- The educator perpetuates privilege through exercising the option to ignore language that was/is used by white people to oppress Black people (Asim, 2008).
- The educator does not enforce or acknowledge the school policy, which could lead to some students thinking the use of *the word* is okay in all contexts of school (Ford, 2021).

Critical Reflection Towards the Disruption of white supremacist Ideology

Why is it important for educators to consider history, tone, tenor, and context regarding the multiple Black perspectives intertwined with the use of the word?

Scenario 2: Song Lyrics

A racially diverse group of students who identify as BIPOC and white are having lunch in the school's courtyard outside. They are listening to songs to create their ultimate play list for their senior year skip day. One of the students plays a popular song with explicit lyrics, and the students sing along. The white students in the group participate in singing as well, and all together they sing the lines which contains *the word*.

Educator Response 1: "Watch your language. That's not allowed here. You know better, and furthermore, under no circumstances is it okay for a white person to say that word."

Intent
- The educator wants to create a safe space for Black students by discouraging the use of racial epithets in academic spaces.
- The educator seeks to enforce school policy regarding discriminatory language (Pryor, 2019).
- The educator wants to actively exercise their [allyship](#) (Jackson et al., 2020).

Impact
- [The response requires further learning and development as to why the white kids think it is okay to say *the word*](#) in certain contexts (Kenney, 2023).
- When white students use *the word*, even without intention to harm, there is an underlying assumption and history with *the word* that centers whiteness and vilifies what it means to be Black (Asim, 2008).
- The educator's allyship can be perceived as performative.

Educator Response 2: *Inner sentiment: I am going to ignore the use of* the word *because it is being repeated in a song and I am anti-censorship.*

Intent
- The educator believes in freedom of speech and expression (Bernard, 2005).
- The educator wants to avoid censorship of language in youth spaces.
- The educator takes a race-evasive stance to avoid discomfort.

Impact
- The educator contributes to an unsafe situation by not acknowledging/understanding the history tied to *the word* (Asim, 2008).
- The educator helps facilitate harm to some Black students who believe *the word,* even being repeated, is harmful and centers whiteness.
- The educator removes themselves from holding themselves accountable from ensuring the Black students feel safe in their educational environment.

Critical Reflection Towards the Disruption of white supremacist Ideology

Why would white students use of the word*, and subsequent punishment/consequence for use of* the word*, not fall under censorship or freedom of speech?*

Scenario 3: A white student calls out for his Black friend to wait up for him as the class is dismissing for lunch. Instead of using his friend's name, he yells out *the word*—using the version commonly used to signal camaraderie.

Educator Response 1: "Watch your language, we shouldn't use that word, in school or ever."

Intent
- The educator feels the need to uphold the language discrimination policy (Ford, 2021).
- The educator is enforcing their perspective of everyone's use of *the word* in society, without considering the complexity of its use.

Impact
- The educator reinforces decontextualized language policy which does not consider context (Ford, 2021).
- The educator doesn't provide a space for nuanced conversation around *the word* (Asim, 2008).

Educator Response 2: *Inner sentiment: I wouldn't address a Black student for saying that to his friend, so I'm not going to say anything to the white student.*

Intent
- The educator does not want to feel like they are only prejudicial towards the white student.
- The educator is afraid of creating social discomfort for white students by calling them out (Cabrera et al., 2021).
- The educator assumes the use of *the word* cannot be taken as hostile because he used the "a" ending (Parks et al., 2007).

Impact
- The educator reinforces the status quo and upholds white supremacy by ignoring historical oppression of marginalized groups in favor of so-called equality.
- The educator may contribute to Black students feeling disempowered to speak up about racist incidents through the educator's silence.
- White students feel that the use of *the word* is okay and allowed.

Action Steps to Addressing *the word* in Schools:

- Educate yourself on the history of *the word*; the meaning and context of *the word* must be self-taught. Seek resources if you are still unsure of how to teach the history, meaning and context in educational settings (Rahman, 2012). To this end, white and non-Black people of Color should avoid placing the labor on Black people to educate them.
- Create spaces for dialogue in which Black students and educators can share their perspectives on *the word* so schools/educators can develop a better understanding of how they will address the use of *the word* (Price, 2023). Using racial caucusing groups to insulate conversations towards safer spaces may be beneficial.
- Clearly reiterate that hate speech and hate language directed at a group of people or an individual is never allowed (Ali, 2010).
- Have high expectations for academic spaces to cultivate continuous growth and learning (Mitchell, 2018).
- Critically reflect on how your identity intersects with the historical and socio-political context of *the word* and what it could mean to people based on how they identify.

Before We Let You Go:

The word in schools is a complex subject, and the context surrounding the use of *the word* is critical to understanding the intent and impact behind the use. Regardless of the context, one belief is very clear: in no way should a white student or non-Black student of Color call a Black student *the word* (with the -er) to cause harm. This is never okay. Educators should recognize the use of *the word* in this context as a racial epithet and address it accordingly.

However, the other various instances in which *the word* is used calls for more understandings of the contextual nature and purpose, as well as the individual's experience with *the word*. For some people in the Black community, *the word's* use is a reclamation of *the word* and a shift in power. For others in the Black community, it should be eliminated from use and never serves a purpose, even if being repeated from a text or song. This *Equity Express* is an attempt to briefly showcase how one's use of *the word* in school can be interpreted and interrupted in schools. Each and every year the U.S. Department of Justice is involved in several investigations addressing discrimination and harassment on the basis of race and national origin (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022); there is no clear, one-size-fits-all answer—and necessitates opportunities for discourse to understand the complex history and contemporary implications of *the word*.

Meet the Authors

This issue of *Equity Express* was written and edited by:

**Robin G. Jackson, Kathryn N. Rusnak
William A. Proffitt, Jeffery J. Franklin,
Kathleen King Thorius, & Tiffany S. Kyser**

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Indianapolis